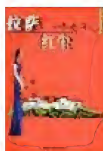


REVIEW: *LOVE IN LHASA*

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Baima Nazhen 白玛娜珍. 2002. *Lhasa hong chen* 拉萨红尘 [*Love in Lhasa*]. Xizang renmin chubanshe 西藏人民出版社 [Tibet People's Press]. 295 pp. ISBN 7-223-01433-4/I-341 (paperback 16RMB).



Pema Nordrun (James Yongue and Wan Jiahui, translators). 2016. *Love in Lhasa*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Publishing House. 260 pp. ISBN 978-7-5001-4337-6 (paperback 35RMB).

Baima Nazhen (Pema Nordrun, Pad+ma nor sgron པདྨ་ནོར་སྒྲོན་) is a contemporary Tibetan female writer. Born into an educated family, she studied art and media studies at the People's Liberation Army Art Academy and School of Journalism and Communication in Chongqing. Having engaged in a wide range of jobs from dancer, journalist and news presenter, to choreographer-director, she currently works at the Tibet Writers' Association, concentrating on writing and creation. Her publications include a prose collection - *The Colors of Life* (1997), two collections of poetry - *On the Horizon of the Soul* (1999) and *Moonlight in Tibet* (2013), and two novels - *Love in Lhasa* (2002) and *Resurrected Tara* (2006). She is also active on her micro-blog (<http://bit.ly/2yTr9fb>).

Baima left home for inland China boarding schools at the age of eleven after which she did not live with her parents and siblings in Tibet. Her personal life experiences of witnessing cultural clashes between Tibetan tradition and inland urbanization and industrialization has greatly influenced her writing. Her novels tend to portray independent and rebellious Tibetan women endowed with cultural sensitivity and tortured by internal conflict between attachment to the good old past and an aspiration to merge into a brand-new world.

Baima's narrative perspectives and prose-like language differentiates her from many female writers in terms of her writing style. She has expressed admiration for such Western writers as Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), Milan Kundera (b. 1929), Henry Miller (1891-1980), and Karl Marx (1818-1883) (Hu 2013). Her wide reading has influenced her writing in terms of an awakened feminist consciousness and bold depictions of eroticism and sexual relationships. Her writing features both Tibetan religious sacredness and modern human vulgarity. Not only primal animism and union between man and nature are aesthetically portrayed, but also the feminine desire for sexual equality and spiritual love in inter-cultural scenarios is emphasized through forthright depictions of sex and poetic descriptions of romance. Her novels offer a feast for the readers as they approach Tibetan women's lives and love, to see and better understand their inner worlds.

Baima, as a second-generation Tibetan female writer in the twentieth century, filled the void of "female voices" in the Tibetan literary and historical discourses with her female characters, projecting rebellion against the highly patriarchal and male-dominated writings of the past. In this sense, Baima and her works are a significant contribution to ethnic literature in China.

As might be expected, her novels have drawn considerable academic interest and have been translated into English, Mongolian, Uyghur, and Tibetan. James Yongue and Wan Jiahui provide an English translation (2015) of *Lhasa hong chen*. Although this English version features numerous grammatical mistakes, textual mistranslations, and contextual misunderstandings, it is a laudable attempt to introduce Tibetan literature to English readers and is also of referential value for critics and other translators. A more careful proofreading might well lead this English version to more readers, better marketing, and greater achievement in cultural bridging.

Published in 2002, *Love in Lhasa* is Baima's first novel. The background is the 1980s at a time when China was engaging in fast-paced development of industrialization and commercialization as part of the Reform and Opening Up that began in the late 1970s. Most of the novel's episodes are set on the Tibetan Plateau where local Tibetans are affected by the trend of modernization. Young people in particular

have increased opportunities to go out and see the world and also experience more challenges in dealing with issues of self-identity, and exploring the meaning of their existence. Against such a fast-changing social background, Tibetan women are faced with poignant life choices, especially as compared to traditional women.

The novel's plot unfolds with the parallel life trajectories of the two female characters, Langsa and Yama, who are classmates and close friends at Tibet Military College. After graduation, the two young women leave the army and work in non-military areas as nurses. Langsa, the narrator, falls in love with a pilgrim, Varma, who comes from an isolated part of Tibet where Tibetan, Hui, and Han nationalities live together. They enjoy their otherworldly, extremely romantic relationship, and in the end, choose to live a reclusive life in the unknown hinterlands of Tibet.

In contrast, Yama, the heroine, undergoes more complicated love experiences. Yama is the focus of this novel, embodying qualities of a "lost girl," such as beauty, rebelliousness, freedom-loving, desire, dreamer, degradation, and despair. After a pre-marriage affair with Di, a young Han man, she marries Zedan, a Tibetan, and her first real love. Disappointed by domestic life, she succumbs to temptation and has an extra-marital affair with Xu Nan in Shanghai.

During her work shift, the erotic and siren-like Yama has a fling with a young, anonymous Tibetan admirer, which results in the death of a patient whose intravenous injection she should have been attending to. Yama's chaotic story ends when she amicably divorces Zedan and focuses on her career.

Yama represents young, educated Tibetan women who make wrong choices when engaging with the modern world and then bear the bitter consequences of abortion, betrayal, and despair. All the male characters in Yama's orbit are realistic and bound to a sort of fatalism amid the torrents of social transformation. Zedan, for example, falls into the trap of commercialization as tourism booms in Tibet. Lost in a "modern" lifestyle, he begins to associate with prostitutes while managing a business and making money.

Di, a young Han man, came to Tibet in the 1980s when the government encouraged young college graduates to go to Tibet to contribute their youth. Love between this pair from different ethnic

backgrounds is enchanted and fragile. Yama chooses to marry Zedan when he returns to Tibet while Di marries an uncouth Han woman from the countryside.

The third male character, Xu Nan, was a thief and orphan in the army. His yearning for love resembles that of a child crying for maternal care. Yama is sympathetic. Feeling desperate in her married life, she applies for a one-year exchange program in Shanghai and lives with him. However, shabby living conditions and the hustle and bustle of life in a metropolis prove intolerable for Yama and she quits her lover as well as Shanghai.

Compared to the narrator, Langsa is loyal and devoted to her soulmate and lover, Varma. In contrast, Yama is unable to find her place in life. The more she anchors the meaning of her life in love, the more desperate she becomes.

I now want to discuss characterization in this novel. The vivid and detailed depictions of the two young women's inner worlds and surrealistic portrayals of their dreams and fantasies are bound to stir the reader's complex emotions toward young, well-educated Tibetan women.

The novel's publication has encouraged vigorous discussion, e.g., Bai (2008) comments that "this novel depicts the existential fact of modern Tibetan intellectual<sup>1</sup> women from multiple dimensions and various angles" (73). Xu (2011) interprets the novel as a model of "bold and enthusiastic expression of feminist consciousness, pious religious affection, and mysterious religious baptism" (47) and awakening of "sexual consciousness, subject consciousness, modern consciousness" (48) of Tibetan women. Xu (2015) also notes Yama's "vagina worship" (19) - Yama's pride in her feminine charms - that goes hand in hand with anxious concern over the brevity of youth, which incites her hedonistic indulgence.

Pubu Changju (2010) writes:

Baima Nazhen's works engage the process of social and cultural transformation of Tibet since its peaceful liberation, and have introduced

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<sup>1</sup> The term "intellectual" refers to "educated elites" and may include professionals who are educated in a certain area of knowledge (Li 2015:5).

new artistic figures into the contemporary literary stage - 'dreamers' of the time... There are a group of women in modern Tibetan society who have not fully recognized the value of traditional culture and fail to establish a new knowledge structure so they are depressed with a sense of emptiness of being in a void between two cultures (138).

Zhaxi Dawa (2002) writes that "this is a novel exploring the experience of modern Tibetans searching for a spiritual home" and "all the characters are interpreting the same theme - the loss, search, and re-building of home" (74). Zhaxi Dawa convincingly compares Yama's growth as an experience of contractions: "Since an abortion during her adolescence, she is doomed to suffer from contractions. She is brave, upright, simple-minded, and rebellious. Her life track is a symbolic search - salvation - contraction." (74)

Xu (2011) writes that "Baima is sympathetic to her female characters, not only portraying their physical desires, but also emphasizing their spiritual pursuits" (90) and, furthermore, that the novel demonstrates the author's confusion about where women should go - is it pursuit of a career or religious reclusiveness? (91)

Baima's narrative mode has also been commented on. Bai (2008) suggests that the author created a unique narrative mode, combining a female/feminist narrative and social narrative, integrating folk narrative and national narrative. Baima did not write the stories chronologically. Instead, she employs a style of fragmented plot and stream of consciousness. Two narrators - the omniscient third person narrator and Langsa - alternate in relating the episodes in a total of twenty-seven chapters. Langsa, in the omniscient narrator's role, is more objective, as Baima's confidant and soul-mate. She becomes more subjective and sensational when she takes over the narration and resumes her expression of admiration for her lover, Varma, and the divergent life path Yama chose.

Baima selected a woman as the observer and commentator for another woman as the observed and narratee, revealing her unique feminist perspective and modernist writing style. Baima also inserted some magical-realistic narrative in dealing with romance and sexual indulgence, e.g., Yama's hallucinations of genitals and her female leader becoming a demon ingesting men's semen. Another memorable

scene is Yama's nightmare of Xiaofu - a dead neighbor and adulterer who committed suicide. Xiaofu becomes a frightening aberration who cries desperately. Yama then notices a giant penis among the swaying tree shadows. This penis then becomes her own penis, which she uses to pierce the eyes of her supervisor. Love and death are haunting motifs throughout the novel. The text alternates between realistic and magical-realist and never bores the reader.

Also, of note is the employment of narrative perspective featuring vivid depictions of animal images, for example, dogs, cattle, birds, chickens, lambs, crabs, owls, flies, and horses, suggesting an animistic, pantheist spirit in tandem with karmic relationships and animal reincarnation after death. The employment of these images enhances the prose-like artistic effect, strengthening the contrast between "worldly" and "unworldly" scenarios. Songs and poems help convey the characters' emotions related to human relationships and veneration of nature. A good example of this is the novel's ending with Langsa finishing her story with a poetic stanza (292):

ah, I am a tender trap  
 is every single fraud  
 interwoven with illusions  
 are you shuffling in between for me  
 I am a pond of dead water still for the ages  
 silent every day  
 with passion frozen  
 will you transform to a high snow mountain for me  
 yet love is like a cold sword  
 heart split fiercely  
 will your holy lotus  
 blossom a fiery spring  
 for my flaming lips on flame<sup>1</sup>

This novel is well worth the reader's time. Literary critics as well as those interested in modern Tibetan local life will find it merits multiple readings.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Baima Nazhen 白玛娜珍

Di 迪

Langsa 朗萨

Lhasa, Lasa 拉萨

pad+ma nor sgron བཅའ་མ་ནོར་སྒྲོན།

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School of Journalism and Communication in Chongqing, Chongqing  
xinwen xueyuan 重庆新闻学院

Varma, Guanerma 莞尔玛

Xu Nan 徐楠

Yama 雅玛